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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: SOMALIA - VIOLENCE INCREASES IN ADVANCE OF LIKELY OFFENSIVE

REF: NAIROBI 155

Summary

11. (SBU) Al-Shabaab and Hisbul Islam have increased their attacks against TFG and AMISOM positions in Mogadishu. In an apparent effort to pre-empt the TFG's long-planned Mogadishu offensive, on February 12 and 13 al-Shabaab launched attacks from northern Mogadishu neighborhoods and on February 15, claimed responsibility for an assassination attempt against Minister of State for Defense Yusuf Mohamed Siyad "Inde Adde." Al-Shabaab mortar attacks and the TFG/AMISOM response caused civilian casualties but have failed to yield any new areas of control for either the TFG or al-Shabaab. UNHCR reports that since February 1 at least 13,000 Mogadishu citizens have fled the fighting. In addition to dozens of combatant casualties on both sides, the UN reports that at least 80 civilians were killed in the first two weeks of February. As the TFG prepares for its offensive against al-Shabaab in Mogadishu, it is maintaining key positions with newly trained recruits while the city's residents prepare for the worst. End Summary.

Violent Clashes Increase in Mogadishu

12. (SBU) In recent weeks, al-Shabaab and Hisbul Islam have increased the frequency and intensity of violent attacks against TFG and AMISOM positions in Mogadishu. Beginning February 10, al-Shabaab has repeatedly attacked TFG and AMISOM troops with small arms and mortar fire, provoking the TFG and AMISOM to respond in kind. Mortar rounds launched by both sides have killed an estimated two dozen civilians and wounded many more in recent days. Most believe that these skirmishes are in response to February 6 TFG troop movements (reftel), and are extremists' attempt to disrupt a promised TFG/AMISOM offensive in Mogadishu. Our contacts report that al-Shabaab is building its arsenal and concentrating its fighters in several strategic areas in and around the city.

13. (SBU) Sources have told us the TFG troop movement has prompted al-Shabaab to reinforce from their strongholds in the southern parts of Mogadishu to the northern neighborhoods, to directly engage recently repositioned TFG troops. During the skirmishes,

the TFG troops reportedly performed better than in the past, drawing on recent training in Djibouti and with AMISOM trainers at the TFG's Jazeera camp, according to our contacts. Continuing their attacks on the airwaves, Hisbul Islam and al-Shabaab leaders publicly appealed to Mogadishu's residents for support against the TFG and AMISOM in what they termed a "religious obligation." The TFG responded to these appeals, effectively using Radio Mogadishu to continue their own information campaign against these groups.

Assassination Attempt Targets State Minister of Defense

14. (SBU) Al-Shabaab has continued its attacks against high-level TFG officials. On February 15, State Minister for Defense Yusuf Mohamed Siyad "Indha Adde" narrowly escaped at least one suicide car bomb attack against his convoy in Mogadishu. Reports still vary, but as many as eight civilians and two TFG troops may have been killed. Addressing the press immediately following the attack, the Minister of State said that al-Shabaab would not deter him from his mission to "restore law and order." He told journalists two car bombs were used against him on February 15. A

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minibus coincidentally obstructed the first car bomb as the bomber sped toward the minister's convoy. The minister told the press that he saw a second oncoming car and in the confusion following the first explosion, ran into a nearby hotel. Inde Adde said that moments later, this second car also exploded.

15. (SBU) The bomb or bombs caused extensive property damage, including to the offices of USAID implementing partner Education Development Center (EDC), which provides education programs via radio and a youth livelihood program in Mogadishu. No EDC staff were injured. EDC reported by email, "The explosion created an atmosphere of terror and panic in the area with no public movement as government forces arrived at the scene and sealed off the road."

Civilian Displacement Continues

16. (SBU) Mogadishu's residents have begun to flee in the face of increasingly violent skirmishes between government troops and extremists. UNHCR reported that since February 1, at least 13,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) have moved into safer neighborhoods within the capital and into the Afgoye road corridor, joining over 365,000 people displaced by earlier fighting. On February 15, UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator Mark Bowden expressed "grave concern" over high civilian casualties and population displacement. According to Bowden, fighting in Mogadishu in the first two weeks of February killed an estimated 80 civilians. UNHCR reports that since May 2009, when armed extremists launched their first offensive against President Sharif's administration, more than 250,000 persons have been forced to flee Mogadishu.

Comment

17. (SBU) We will continue to monitor the increase in fighting, and will stress to the TFG and AMISOM the need to avoid civilian casualties. In particular, we will continue to object strongly to TFG and AMISOM use of mortar fire in populated areas. USAID is examining the growth of IDPs and investigating NGO partners' reports al-Shabaab is blocking food assistance to IDPs in the Afgoye corridor.
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